



Press Release
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Alaska Air Guardsmen help family 3,000 miles away

CAMP DENALI, Alaska – In an instant, everything was gone. A lifetime of laughter, tears and memories lay smoldering in a heap of twisted metal and charred lumber. Annette Cook was now without a home.

On Aug. 23, 2011, a propane facility in Butler County, Kan., encountered a gas-release, subsequently causing an enormous fire with as many as 40 separate explosions at the propane-fill station. Harmless tanks of propane turned into 100-pound rockets, shooting in every direction, intent on destruction, according to eye-witnesses.

When the fire subsided and the dust settled, one person was killed, a building and three houses were destroyed, including Cook's home.

"It looked like a bomb went off, rubble and ash were everywhere," Cook said.

More than 3,000 miles away in interior Alaska, Tech. Sgt. Ricky Ramos, a security forces fire-team leader for the Alaska Air National Guard's 213th Space Warning Squadron at Clear Air Force Station, checked Facebook and noticed some unsettling photos posted by his childhood classmate Annette.

"I was looking at the aftermath and the destruction, and there was just nothing left," Ramos said.

He scrolled one by one through photos of Annette's house decimated by one of the propane tanks. Looking at warped metal where appliances once were, he saw something that spurred him into action.

"I saw a partly-burnt flag that was her father's, who was a major in the Air Force," Ramos said. "And I saw a Purple Heart Medal belonging to her grandfather, Fireman 1st Class Russell Shaw, that was melted and blackened from the explosion."

Annette's grandfather was on board the USS Drexler when it was sunk by a Japanese Kamikaze attack on May 28, 1945, and he was one of the 158 casualties on the destroyer.

Wanting to help out, Ramos decided to talk to his unit and figure out a way to comfort and take care of the Cook family, half-a-continent away.

"I called up their family as soon as I could, and the first questions they asked were: Who is this? You're calling from where?" Ramos recalled with a chuckle.

Once the confusion abated, Annette's sister, Angie Shaw, explained to him that they had no idea how to replace the tarnished military decorum.

"I looked at my guys, and they simply looked back at me," Ramos said. "I got back on the phone and told her, don't worry about it. We'll take care of it."

From there, Ramos and his fellow Airmen dedicated hours of their free time, money from their pockets, and a sense of duty and honor for someone who they have never met. The goal was to have the newly titled "Purple Heart Project" finished by the end of the holiday season.

"We just took it upon ourselves to fix it," Ramos said. "Granted, it's not going to replace the house or give all of their belongings back. But for us, it's a start."

After months of research and raising money, Ramos and his unit were able to replace the Purple Heart and burnt flag, and put it into a new shadow box to be displayed at the Cook family's new home.

"I was shocked they took the time to do this for me, I was blown away," Cook said.

While Ramos is happy to help an old friend in her time of need, he also says he did it out of honor and respect for a family that has a legacy of service to our nation.

"These guys opened the doors of freedom that we walk through every day," Ramos said. "They have given so much, and we were more than willing to do it for their family."

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Photo Cutlines:

House Remains

This is all that remains of Annette Cook's house in Butler County, Kan., after a 100-pound propane tank propelled into it and exploded Aug. 23, 2011. Cook posted this photo online where Alaska Air National Guard Tech. Sgt. Ricky Ramos, from Clear Air Force Station, saw it and was spurred into action to help her family. Photo courtesy of Annette Cook

Flag Fold

Members of the Alaska Air National Guard 213th Space Warning Squadron perform an official flag folding ceremony at Clear Air Force Station to replace one burnt in a house explosion in Kansas Aug. 23, 2011. The home belonged to Annette Cook, a childhood friend of Alaska Air National Guard Tech. Sgt. Ricky Ramos, from Clear Air Force Station, who was spurred into action to help the Cook family after seeing pictures of the destruction online. The team also built a shadow box to display the new flag at Cook's new home. Photo courtesy of Tech. Sgt. Ricky Ramos, 213th Space Warning Squadron

New Display

A new shadow box and U.S. flag are on display in Annette Cook's new home in Butler County, Kan. They sit next to a signed photo of her childhood friend Alaska Air National Guard Tech. Sgt. Ricky Ramos and his 213th Space Warning Squadron members who volunteered to help Cook after her family's home was destroyed during an explosion Aug. 23, 2011. Photo courtesy of Annette Cook

213th SWS

Members of the 213th Space Warning Squadron hold the new American flag that was sent to Annette Cook, a childhood friend of Alaska Air National Guard Tech. Sgt. Ricky Ramos, to replace the flag damaged in an explosion that destroyed Cook's Butler County, Kan., home. Pictured back row, left to right: Staff Sgt. Joseph Brokus, Staff Sgt. William Stead, Tech. Sgt. Christoph Albritton and Staff Sgt. Benjamin Drake. Middle row, left to right: Staff Sgt. Matthew Powell, Staff Sgt. Thomas Elliott and Staff Sgt. Robert Ives. Front row, left to right: Tech. Sgt. Ricky Ramos and Senior Airman Justin Smith. The team dedicated hours of volunteered time, money and effort to replace the military decorum that Cook lost in the explosion. Photo courtesy of Tech. Sgt. Ricky Ramos, 213th Space Warning Squadron